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SOME OUTLINES OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE IN THE SOUTHEASTERN STATES

By FRANK G. SPECK

In the course of linguistic and ethnologic researches in behalf of the Bureau of American Ethnology and the American Museum of Natural History among the Yuchi Indians now in Indian Territory, it was found necessary to extend investigations over their immediate neighbors, the Creek Indians of Taskigi town, after certain analogies in culture had presented themselves. In following up matters among these two groups which were fairly typical of the former inhabitants of southeastern United States, incidental data were obtained from other tribes of the Creeks and the Chickasaw ; so that taking it together with what has been published on the region, it was considered sufficient to make at least a preliminary classification of cultural phases.

The surviving members that form this group, without regard to their linguistic affiliations, are the Creek (Maskogi) tribes, the Yuchi, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw, while the now defunct Siouan fragments in the Carolinas probably fell within the limits as well.¹ Comparatively speaking, nothing is known of many of these tribes, and little more of some of the others. Most of them have not yet been studied or else exist in such a state of disintegration as to be unimportant.

The narratives of De Soto, given us by the Knight of Elvas, Rangel, Garcilasso de la Vega, and Biedma,² and the accounts by De Bry, Le Moyne,³ Bossu,⁴ Du Pratz,⁵ and Lawson,⁶ are about the

¹ Mooney, Siouan Tribes of the East, *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1894.

² *Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto in the Conquest of Florida*, edited with an Introduction by Edward Gaylord Bourne ; Trail Makers Series, New York, 1904. Garcilasso de la Vega, *Histoire de la Conquête de la Floride*, Leide, 1731.

³ *Larger Voyage*, pt. II, Florida.

⁴ *Travels through Louisiana*, Lond., 1771.

⁵ *Histoire de la Louisiane*, Paris, 1758.

⁶ *A New Voyage to Carolina*, Lond., 1709.

earliest sources of ethnologic information, and they are fragmentary enough. Then follow Adair,¹ in whose extended arguments some important facts are incidentally obtainable, and Bartram,² Schoolcraft,³ Catlin,⁴ Lederer,⁵ Hawkins,⁶ and Woodward,⁷ who afford much valuable information on sociological and religious subjects. Morgan⁸ has recorded lists of social divisions, which have subsequently been challenged. Gallatin,⁹ Byington,¹⁰ and Gatschet,¹¹ have published material on languages of the region, and Gatschet mentions visits to remnants of the smaller stocks and tribes. The later works of Gatschet¹² give us valuable data on the whole group, while the manuscripts of W. O. Tuggle¹³ and James Mooney's¹⁴ works on the Cherokee are about the only detailed collections of myths that are thus far available. Material culture has been well treated by C. C. Jones,¹⁵ while the archeologic researches of Moore¹⁶ and Holmes¹⁷ stand as the most complete of their kind. A few other articles contain material on special tribes.¹⁸

¹ *History of the American Indians*, Lond., 1775.

² *Travels through North and South Carolina*, Phila., 1791.

³ *Indian Tribes*, vols. I-VI, Phila., 1851-57.

⁴ *North American Indians* (1832-39), Lond., 1866.

⁵ *Discoveries of John Lederer* (1669-70), Lond., 1672; reprinted, Rochester, N. Y., 1902.

⁶ Sketch of the Creek Country (1798-99), in *Georgia Hist. Soc. Coll.*, 1848.

⁷ *Reminiscences*, 1842.

⁸ *Ancient Society*, New York, 1877.

⁹ In *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. II, Cambridge, 1836.

¹⁰ *Grammar of the Choctaw Language*, Phila., 1870.

¹¹ In *Science*, vol. IX, 1887, p. 404 et seq.

¹² *Migration Legend of the Creek Indians*, vol. I, Phila., 1884; vol. II, St Louis 1888.

¹³ *Creek Myths*, in the archives of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

¹⁴ Myths of the Cherokee, *Nineteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnology*, pt. I, 1900; Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees, *Seventh Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnology*, 1891.

¹⁵ *Antiquities of the Southern Indians*, N. Y., 1873.

¹⁶ In *Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*, x, xi, xii.

¹⁷ Aboriginal Pottery of Eastern United States, *Twentieth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnology*, 1903.

¹⁸ MacCauley, Seminole Indians of Florida, *Sixth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnology*, 1888; Buckner on Choctaw burial, *Am. Antiq.*, II, 55, 1879, Watkins, *ibid.*, xvi, 262, 1894; Mooney, Cherokee Ball Play, *Am. Anthropologist*, III, 105, 1890; Gatschet, Yuchi Language, *Am. Antiq.*, II, 77, 1879; Gatschet, Some Mythic Stories of the Yuchi Indians, *Am. Anthropologist*, VI, 279, 1893; Hagar, Cherokee Star Lore, *Boas Anniversary*

The Creeks and the Yuchi appear to have most prominently the characterizing features of the group, for on the borders of the area mutual transmission of cultural elements seems to have taken place with outside groups. Hence among the Chickasaw and the Choctaw dissimilarities with the more easterly members are frequently met with, though one cannot hesitate to place them in the Southeastern group. The underlying concepts of their practices are in conformity with the type, despite some external points of difference. Incidentally, when more is known of the Southeastern area, it may become advisable to subdivide it into an eastern and a western branch. Provisionally, then, its geographical limits may be set between the Atlantic ocean and the Mississippi river, from the Gulf of Mexico northward to the affluents of the Ohio river and somewhere in the state of Virginia.

Summarizing the region as regards social divisions, quite a little homogeneity is found. The social unit throughout is the clan, a maternal, exogamic, and totemic clan tracing direct descent from the totem, which is usually an animal. In some parts of the area, however, clans occur which are mere localized communities with descriptive non-totemic names, as seen in the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee. The totem animal is regarded as the guide and benefactor of all the members of its clan. When the social units are assembled for council or ceremony, they encamp in the form of a symbolic square laid out in conformity with the cardinal points. This feature corresponds to the camp-circle of the prairie tribes. In this grouping together of the clans a certain order of precedence is maintained and privileges in the nature of civil or religious offices are inherited by certain clans. As examples of clan hegemony in different villages, we find that the Bear clan has precedence and supplies the town chief among the Yuchi, the Eagle clan among the Tukabaxtci, the Bear in Taskigi town, the Beaver in Tulsa, the Panther in Lutcapoga, and so on.

Volume, 1907; Halbert, general notes on Choctaw, *Am. Antiq.*, xv, 146, 1893; xvi, 215, 1894; xvii, 157, 1895; also in *Pub. Miss. Hist. Soc.*, I-III. Some notes on the Chickasaw are given by Warren in *Pub. Miss. Hist. Soc.*, VIII, 543, 1904; also by Speck in *Jour. Am. Folk-lore*, XXI, no. 76, 1907. Pickett, *Hist. Ala.*, I, 54 et seq., 1851, contains a general review of Southern Indians, as does Brinton, *Notes on the Floridian Peninsula*, Phila., 1859.

Now, in the eastern members of the group, the Creek, Yuchi, and Cherokee, this clan assemblage is a permanent thing and constitutes the town or tribe. Here the square also is permanent and becomes a public shrine with a definite religious symbolism attached to it. All ceremonies take place within it and a council house is situated near by. The Yuchi afford a good example of this; their town square symbolizes a rainbow. It was laid out in colors with sand and ashes, while on its edges permanent sheds were erected for the accommodation of spectators, and public officials had charge of all ceremonies enacted there. It is here furthermore characteristic that the clans were subordinated to the town organization. The development of such a process of alliance gave rise to the organization known in history as the Creek Confederacy, or Creek Nation. The number of clans in the various tribes of the South-eastern group is fairly large. Complete lists from each would probably show at least twenty. In the western section phratries occur, and among the Chickasaw the chief religious festival is an esoteric affair of the phratry or half-tribe.

As a part of a very widespread custom personal names are here found to indicate clan identity, the first name being either the actual name of the person's totem, as in some of the Creek tribes, or the name of an ancestor in the clan, or one chosen by a clansman descriptive of some trait of the clan. Social rank is indicated also by facial painting, the designs of which belong to the phratry, as among the Chickasaw, or to another sort of paternal social division which exists among the eastern branches. It appears most typically among the Yuchi where the divisions are two, called Chief and Warrior, in which certain official positions and personal property are inherited through the father. This form of social classification took a peculiar development among the Natchez, where a certain class of Suns was found.

A few negative features perhaps worth mention here are the absence of secret clan societies and, at the present time at least, the lack of strict taboos regarding the totem animal. The absence of organized legislation in the town life is also noticeable.

The most prominent feature in the ceremonial culture of the Southeast is an annual ceremony of several days' duration, performed

about the time of harvesting the corn crop. During this time ceremonial observances of different sorts take place in succession, observances which are thus carried out but once a year. The ceremony includes fasting, public kindling of the new fire, scarification, and purgation by an emetic of all the males of the tribe or the shamans, and ceremonial games. There are also various dances which are performed mostly after dark in the town square. The elements of worship in the dances of the whole region are the propitiation of evil spirits (either animal or human), thanks to beneficent agencies and totems, and prayer for their good will and help. These dances are imitative, and the accompanying songs consist in part of words and in part of meaningless syllables. The manner of dancing is in single file, following a leader who bears the burden of the song, the followers joining in a responsive stanza at certain regular periods. The movement about the fire, in all cases thus far observed, is contra-clockwise. Aside from performances of worship, the annual ceremony marks the annulment of all personal disputes. Thus it begins a new period of tribal harmony, purity, and prosperity.

In addition to the aforementioned religious ideas of the annual ceremony in the eastern region, particularly among the Yuchi, its enactment is in obedience to commands of the Sun deity, who conditioned their prosperity upon its continuance. In the case of the Chickasaw more prominence is given to a shamanistic ceremony of the phratry than to the harvest rites.

Some of the ceremonial practices characteristic of the Southeast may be traced directly across the southern plains westward to the Pueblo group. Among the Arapaho¹ and the Wichita,² in the pueblos of Sia,³ Oraibi,⁴ and Mishongnovi,⁵ for instance, the rites of fasting and taking the emetic are confined to the priests of the ceremony,

¹ Dorsey, The Arapaho Sun Dance, *Field Columbian Museum Publication No. 75*, Chicago, 1903.

² Dorsey, *Mythology of the Wichita*, Carnegie Institution, Washington, 1904, p. 16.

³ Stevenson, The Sia Indians, *Eleventh Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnology*, 1894, p. 87.

⁴ Voth, Oraibi Summer Snake Ceremony, *Field Columbian Museum Publication No. 83*, 1903, p. 347.

⁵ Dorsey and Voth, Mishongnovi Ceremonies, *Field Columbian Museum Publication No. 66*, 1902, pp. 159-261; Fewkes, Tusayan Snake and Flute Ceremonies, *Nineteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnology*, 1900, p. 976.

in this respect offering a contrast to the area under discussion, where the emetic is taken by all the men of the village.

In nearly every tribe we have mention of a much favored beverage, the "black drink," used also as an emetic by the men in public gatherings. This drinking is attended by a prolonged cry from the lips of the server, at the termination of which the draft must be finished.

Chief among the ceremonial games of the Southeast are the chungke-game, and the ball game which is played here with two sticks, showing a contrast to the same game in neighboring areas where it is played with a single stick. A fairly elaborate ritual accompanies the ball game with little variation in the different tribes of the group. Musical instruments are the pot-drum, log-drum, hand-rattle, knee-rattle, and flute.

Greater homogeneity underlies the shamanistic practices of this region than some of the other cultural phenomena. Disease is attributed to animal spirits or to human conjurers, and the duty of the shaman is to cause the trouble, in the form of a spirit, to leave the person and enter another animal. His practice consists in the preparation of steeped herbs into which he blows through a cane-stalk. In periods of intermission he chants the song-ritual for that particular disease. In the western section the transfer, by sale, of the shamanistic ritual is common.

Some widespread features of domestic life are found in the group, such as the menstrual seclusion lodge, the numerous proscriptions in the diet and behavior of the father of a newborn child, the initiation of youths, and the remarkably unelaborate marriage compact. The same in general is true of beliefs regarding death and burial. The souls are plural and have different functions, one always traveling for a four days' journey to a spirit realm, having to pass an obstacle before safely reaching its destination. During this period of temporary change, acts are performed by the relatives at the grave and provisions are left there to aid the departing soul. A change has taken place in the manner of burial in the entire region since the early times. The elaborate rites connected with cleaning the bones of the dead and reburial in a special clan repository, which formerly characterized the Southeast, have disappeared.

The same is true of burial beneath the floor of the lodge. Nowadays burials are made in the open and small houses are erected there instead. These matters evidently survived latest among the Choctaw and the other western members.

Not much of the former industrial and economic life of the Gulf tribes has survived the changes wrought by Europeans. The natives led a rather sedentary life, noticeably reflected in their religious and political culture, cultivating chiefly corn, melons, potatoes, beans, and tobacco, and storing them away in high cribs elevated on posts. Yet hunting and fishing occupied much of their time. The latter was carried on by poisoning the streams with certain roots,¹ so that the stupefied fish could be secured by means of bows and long-shafted arrows. Their only domestic animals were dogs which could not bark, and these were their companions on the hunt. Fire was produced by drilling. The pottery industry flourished, smoking pipes of clay occurred, and baskets and sieves were constructed of cane and splints. Feather embroidery and the art of weaving mantles of mulberry bark fibers were found by the first explorers, but have long been obsolete. In the earliest times cutting implements were made of stone. Sheet copper, however, was used for the manufacture of some implements and ornaments. Wooden ladles, mortars and pestles, and gourds were the chief household utensils. Houses consisted of bent poles covered with matting or bark in the higher inland regions, while palmetto structures raised above the ground were found in the semitropical districts, like those still in use among the Florida Seminole. Sometimes the sides were plastered with clay. Weapons were spears, simple bows and arrows, and clubs. The employment of the blow-gun in hunting, together with the use of hammocks as baby cradles instead of cradle-boards, a peculiar storage scaffold in one corner of the house, the previously mentioned method of poisoning fish, and evidences in ceramic art² are on the whole very suggestive of waves of cultural transmission into this region from the Antillean

¹ A species of *Tephrosia* was most commonly used.

² Caribbean Influence on the Prehistoric Art of the Southern States, *Am. Anthropologist*, VII, 71, 1894.

or Caribbean area.¹ Tattooing of the body was quite generally practised, and from the accounts of early explorers we learn of head-flattening among the Natchez, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Chitimasha, and the Waxhaw farther eastward. There were, no doubt, other tribes here which did the same.

Information on the decorative art of the Southeast up to the present time comes from only one tribe, the Yuchi. Of them it seems to be true that geometrical designs, such as mountains, rivers, clouds, the milky way, snake, and centipede occur in bead embroidery. Designs of the sun and moon are also found on the rims of pottery used in the ceremonies of the modern Yuchi.

In concluding this attempt to summarize some of the characteristics of Southeastern culture a difficulty presents itself—that of separating the native Indian elements of mythology from a heterogeneous whole that has encumbered itself with many foreign accretions. Some positive results, however, are forthcoming. First mention is of the mythical animals, the cosmic creative agencies, one of which, the Crawfish, brings up some earth from the bottom of the universal watery waste. From this the present earth is formed. These animal beings then cause the existence of light, darkness, and mountains. The culture hero is usually identified with the sun. He is the creator of peoples and the originator of their social and religious culture, and apparently is the chief object of worship. Among the Creek tribes the culture hero is a four-fold personality, "The Men of Light." Myths descriptive and laudatory of the totemic ancestors are abundant and varied. The tricksters of the region are the rabbit in the whole eastern area, and the fox nearer the Mississippi. The tricksters are transformers only in a minor sense and have nothing to do with the culture hero. Some form of the migration legend is everywhere present so far as our material goes. But it is particularly characteristic of the Maskogians who agree in tracing their *terminus a quo* to a point somewhere west and north of their former habitat. The great body of tales, however,

¹ Compare im Thurn, *Among the Indians of Guiana* (Lond., 1883), for use of blowpipes (p. 246) ; houses plastered with clay in savannah regions of Guiana (p. 205) ; fish poisoning (p. 233), where a plant of the same genus (*Tephrosia*) as that used by the Creeks and the Yuchi is employed.

is centered about animal exploits and how the animals acquire their peculiarities. The chief incidents seem to be part of the large category common to nearly the whole of America, known by such general names as the magic flight or obstacle myth, the theft of fire, the foot-race between two rivals, and the origin of death as the result of someone's mistake. In the same class come other well-known elements, as the unsuccessful imitation of the host, the journey to spirit land, the invulnerable man-eating monster, variants of the idea expressed in the tar-baby story, the magical increase of food, and finally the escape from the belly of a water monster.¹

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¹The linguistic and ethnological results of several seasons of field research among the tribes of the Southeast, particularly the Yuchi, will, it is hoped, be published later on, giving in more specific detail what is here presented in a very brief condensed form.